

Genesis 9.8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

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Mark 1.9-15

Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Reflection

The Gospel of Mark gives us the briefest possible account of Jesus being tempted in the desert. Whereas Matthew & Luke both give us the details of the encounter between Jesus and Satan as he was tempted, Mark's account is a mere 33 words: "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."

Reading the accounts in Matthew and Luke, one's attention is automatically drawn to the intense sparring between Jesus and Satan – which Jesus clearly wins. Inevitably, it leaves us questioning whether Mark feels that the temptation of Jesus is unimportant and so rushes on – he only uses 57 words to recount Jesus' baptism! So the number of words he uses is not necessarily indicative of the importance that he puts on the stories that he tells. In fact, the whole of Mark's Gospel has a feeling of breathless haste about it and so it seems unlikely that he is dismissing the event. If then, he seems apparently to merely mention it in passing without dwelling on the details, an alternative question poses itself: what does Mark want us to make of the episode?

We should, perhaps, at this point remember that Mark's Gospel is traditionally held to be the earliest of the Gospels and that it was written perhaps as early as the 40s AD – a mere ten years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and so only 13 years after this particular event. That being the case, it may be that Mark is anticipating that his readers – or, perhaps far more likely, his hearers – would still remember the audible stories from the life of Jesus. If this is the case, we should look more closely at the 33 words that Mark chooses to give us.

The first obvious thing that Mark tells us is that "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert ..". To the Jews of the day, the reference to the desert would automatically have resonated. Their history was one where deserts had featured significantly in their history. At the Exodus, after Yahweh – their God – had rescued them from their slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt and led them through the Red Sea, they were led through the desert to the Promised Land. In the desert, they were tested by lack of water and lack of food to the point that they turned on Moses and complained that they would have been better off to have stayed in Egypt. Nevertheless, God provided them with both water from a rock that Moses struck with his staff. He also gave them both quail and manna in the desert.

Later on, again in the desert, they complained and so snakes were sent among them so that they were bitten and died. In their distress, they cried to the Lord and so Moses made a bronze snake and affixed and lifted it up on a pole so that when they looked at it they would be healed.

We too have our deserts – those times when we feel abandoned by God and the help we need. Deserts are – by definition – dry and barren places, However, nature shows that they are aren't as barren as we might imagine. However, there are times when we feel that life experiences have left us totally cut-off from everything. At those times, we feel dry and barren. But God is very good at meeting us – his people – in the desert and bring us both water and food from the unexpected places. Sometimes those barren times can seem to last forever but God is always leading us to the Promised Land to find refreshment. That doesn't, of course, make the desert experience any more comfortable but it should remind us that it is never endless.

The other thing that we immediately notice in Mark's account of Jesus' temptation is that he was in the desert for 40 days – another dimension that can get lost in the longer accounts because we focus on the words that passed between Jesus and Satan. Again, the number forty has quite a significance in the history of the Israelites. I reminded us earlier, that the Israelites were led through the desert after crossing the Red Sea and that they grumbled about the lack of food and water. Although God fed and watered them, he was also angered and insulted by their lack of trust in him. As a result, he declared that that generation would not enter the Promised Land and so they spent 40 years wandering around in the desert – though their shoes did not wear out in that time. Our Old Testament reading today is part of the story of Noah and the flood. It is, perhaps, interesting to note that the flood that floated the ark that Noah built in obedience to God's instructions took forty days and 40 nights to produce. Moreover, after the flood had subsided and the mountain top was revealed, Noah waited for forty days and forty nights before he released the raven to see if the waters had gone down sufficiently. We also remember that, once the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, God called Moses up Mount Sinai to speak to him and receive the Ten Commandments on the tablets. Exodus Chapter 24 tells us that Moses was on Mount Sinai with God for forty days and forty nights before receiving the tablets.

Significant as the desert and the forty days & forty nights might be, we need to remember that at this time Jesus was tempted in the desert. We all face our deserts and we all face our temptations. In the accounts of Matthew and Luke, Satan was remarkably blunt in confronting Jesus and inviting him to worship him instead of God and so receive the world and everything in it – even though that wasn't a gift that Satan had any right to offer. But, of course, this wasn't the first time that Satan had tempted humankind. In the Book of Genesis, in Chapters 2 & 3, we read how the serpent convinced Eve that God had not actually said what she thought he had. The old joke runs 'Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on. On level, of course, this is a gross simplification. However, the reality is that each of us – whether we are Adam or Eve – will be confronted with difficult choices. At those times of indecision (however momentary), we have to balance the thing that we want to do with whether we think it is right or wrong, whether it agrees with

what the Bible teaches us or not. Some choices will be obvious – others will be more subtle. Some will be clear cut in terms of the answer but others will produce a more significant dilemma.

In the desert, Jesus faced up to the tempting of Satan – the invitation to seize power, authority and prove that he was the Son of God – square on. He did not flinch, he did not waver and stood his ground and, effectively, told Satan ‘where to get off’. This episode at the beginning of his ministry can be paired with another at the end of his ministry. Just before his betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to his Father. There he faced the choice of drinking the chalice of suffering that would lead to the redemption of mankind through his death of the cross. Despite his doubts, Jesus chose to do the will of the Father rather than his own. Some have seen this as a direct parallel that undid the disobedience in the Garden of Eden by Adam and Eve. However, it could easily be argued that Jesus being tempted in the desert immediately after his baptism is another such parallel.

The fact that Jesus was tempted just as we are is important. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our High Priest, who has passed through the veil and sits at God’s right hand. The amazing thing is that he is not ‘just’ sitting at God’s right hand. The author of this Letter sees Jesus as standing in the presence of God with a crucial job to do. He stands there to intercede, to intervene, to speak, on our behalf. He knows what temptation is like, its power to deceive. So he knows the choices that we face and so can sympathise with us in our difficulties. He stands to rescue us from the condemnation of God for sinning – for making the wrong choices. In this sense temptation and sin are not the same thing. We may be tempted to do the wrong thing – but we do not sin unless we actually fall into the folly of doing it – be it mentally or physically. But Jesus asks the Father not to give us our just desserts for our choices but rather to look at him and, because of his sacrifice on the cross for us and our sins, forgive us our sins and see us as we are in Christ rather than we actually are. As Paul assures us, at the Second Coming, we shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye into the redeemed glory that God has prepared for those who put their trust and faith in the redeeming life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The songs chosen for our service today pick up all these themes. The first reminds us of the forty days and forty nights that Jesus spent in the desert. The second, an older chorus that may be unknown to some of you, reminds us that this was the purpose for which Jesus was revealed – to destroy all the works of the evil one. Some of those works are, of course, to tempt us down the wrong path. The last one, At the name of Jesus, invites us to crown Jesus as our captain in temptation’s hour. Because Jesus has fought verbally with Satan in the desert and on the cross with the power of sin and death and overcome them all, we can crown him as our captain with confidence. He is faithful and true and will not let us down.

I pray that we may have the courage and resolve to resist the temptations of Satan with the power that Jesus gives us through his death and resurrection. Amen.